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ABSTRACT

To persuade adult audiences in business and industry of the need for change in the writing, the consultant must first know precisely what changes are desirable. One source for this information is the Document Design Project funded by the National Institute of Education, conducted by scholars from a variety of disciplines, and supported by government and business. The project's text, "Writing in the Professions," presents models for the following concepts the consultant needs to address: (1) writing as a process; (2) planning, especially analysis of readers, purpose, and readers' task; (3) organizing a document; (4) using principles of clear language; and (5) revising and editing. The text also contains a checklist for clear writing, to help writers edit the language of a document. Writers on the job can use these checklists both for self-review and for reviewing others' writing. Consultants are fortunate to have available the work of the Document Design Project to use as a guide in designing courses, as an authority in persuading trainees to want to change, and as a source for practical, workable methods and materials that can be adapted to particular audiences. (Among the items contained in the appendixes are checklists for prewriting and indexing a document, an example of setting the context, organizing principles, and guidelines for writing clearly.) (HOD)

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USING THE DOCUMENT DESIGN APPROACH IN CONSULTING

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As we all know, research in writing in the past twenty-odd years has taught those of us in the profession to conceive of writing in new ways. One aspect of this new vision, as you also know, is the need for clear and simple writing in business, industry and government. It's one thing, however, to teach these new concepts to college students, and another to teach them to adults who use writing in their jobs. While many of the writing consultant's clients are interested and receptive, there are always some who resist the new -- who are not particularly open to change. At the risk of sounding negative about consulting -- which I certainly don't mean to do -- I want to focus first on some of the challenges the writing consultant must face.

Let's take a close look at the work world audience. Many people attend writing courses because they believe that good writing will help advance their career, and they genuinely want to write better. Some, however, come because they feel that writing takes up too much of their work time, and they simply want to be able to write more quickly and easily. For others, attending a writing course -- be it for a day, a week, or longer -- isn't a choice activity. Many were sent by their bosses, and perhaps even told that their writing is substandard and must be improved.

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The members of this somewhat ambivalent audience are mature adults. This means that, on the one hand, they have more knowledge and experience than students; but on the other hand, they are more set in their writing habits and beliefs about writing. Research into how adults learn has shown that they "need to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep and use the new information. Information that conflicts with what is already held to be true, and thus forces a re-evaluation of the old material, is integrated more slowly. Also, information that has little conceptual overlap with what is already known is acquired slowly." In addition, adults "tend to take errors personally, and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem."[1] That is, they tend to be sensitive to criticism and to take fewer risks.

Many different conceptions of writing bounce around the work world, like so many balls on a court. People come to writing courses for reasons and with expectations based on these conceptions. The consultant, like any player, has to be prepared to take these balls as they come and to return them with her own twist on them -- even, possibly, in a new direction. You won't be surprised at what many writing course participants, schooled in the traditional paradigm and immersed in the business world, conceive of as good writing -- and therefore want to learn in a writing course. For example, there's always a small percentage of the audience who believes that a refresher course in correct grammar and punctuation, plus a little vocabulary coaching, will do the trick. There's another group who believe that formulas

and formats exist for every document they need to write. These people want a course that gives them the formulas, so that they can write by plugging their information into the slots. Finally, a sizeable percentage of the audience has preconceived ideas about style. They believe that what's often called "Official Style" -- the heavy, formal, foggy use of language which Plain English is aimed against -- is the best style for business and technical writing. They like to use big words, abstract words, jargon, and long sentences, and they love the passive voice.

Clearly, a consultant whose objective is to facilitate change towards clear and simple writing in experienced, adult audiences in business and industry needs to be very persuasive. One way to be persuasive, as the Greeks taught us long ago, is to appeal to an authority. We have a fine source of help close at hand in the Document Design approach. We can use Document Design to persuade our audience in several ways. First, we can appeal to the authority of the project itself: the facts that it has been funded by the National Institute of Education, conducted by scholars from a variety of disciplines, and supported by government and business, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Second, we can base our assertions about clear writing on the results of research conducted in the Document Design project. Third, we can use Document Design methods and materials to help the audience gain the writing skills we're concerned with.

To persuade our audiences of the need for change, the consultant must first know precisely what changes are desirable.

The Document Design project, through research and experience with writers and actual writing in government and business, has identified some major needs of on-the-job writers. In my own consulting in business and industry, I regularly try to address in particular three of these needs of writers:

1. "They need to tackle whole pieces of discourse, focusing on general procedures and processes for writing rather than on recipes for special types of documents."
2. "They need systematic procedures . . . to learn what the readers need to know. . . As they define purpose, audience, and readers' tasks, they must be able to link these to choices of organization, style, and graphics, and to evaluate the effectiveness of what they write."
3. "They need research-based guidelines for using clear, comprehensible language."[2]

I'd like to share with you some specific ways in which I use Document Design concepts, methods, and materials to accomplish these objectives. To do this, I'll focus on specific concepts addressed in the American Institutes for Research (AIR) text, Writing in the Professions; material from the text that illustrates the concept; and a way I have adapted the material to writing samples of course participants. The concepts -- ones I feel most consistently need to be addressed among audiences I have worked with -- are the following:

1. writing as a process
2. planning, especially analysis of readers, purpose, and readers' task

3. organizing a document, using
   -- a context-setting introduction
   -- logical organizing principles
4. using principles of clear language
5. revising and editing

In discussing the concept of writing as a process, the consultant must take into account that most writers presently in the work force have little or no awareness of how they go about writing. They have a sense that writing is terribly time-consuming and difficult, but don't know how they might improve the process or the product. It's not hard to sell the concept of writing as a process, then, if we cite the research and the idea that awareness of our process and understanding of useful writing strategies can help us write more quickly, easily, and effectively. When I present the Document Design process model to adult audiences, I emphasize the flexibility of the model. I urge the audience to view the model not as a rule-bound procedure but as a way to help us know what we're doing and why -- as a guide for easier writing, and a reminder that better writing can result from paying attention to all parts of the process.

In teaching planning, I introduce a version of a pre-writing questionnaire which appears in Writing in the Professions (Appendix A).[3] This version, I believe, was developed by Siegel and Gale. The ten questions focus the writer on the five boxes in the pre-writing phase of the process model, with particular emphasis on readers. I ask trainees to answer these questions for a typical document they write or the most recent one they

have written. The results are indeed interesting. Experienced writers in the work world generally have a clearer concept of their audience, purpose and message than do college students. Yet when I ask, "What questions are here that you don't usually consider?" and "What information did you discover that didn't occur to you before?", almost everybody has something to say. Writers on the job know their primary audience -- the one to whom the document is addressed -- but often don't consider the needs of secondary readers. They may not consider how readers will use the document. They frequently ignore the fact that the document may be filed and used again later. And they express everything from shock to rueful laughter when they confront their readers' probable attitude and reaction to the document.

Writers in business and industry also need to gain awareness that a document must provide a context at the beginning; in particular, it must state the purpose and the main message -- that is, the result or conclusion, if there is one. The point to be made here, again based on research, is that readers can comprehend and remember better information that's based in a context. Another point is that stating the purpose and conclusion at the beginning serves two practical goals: (1) it helps busy readers decide whether to read further; and (2) it prevents hasty readers from misunderstanding the purpose and thereby making errors in judgment or action. In teaching this concept, I show models such as this one from Writing in the Professions (Appendix B)[4] and contrast them with actual documents, if possible a document written by someone in the course. Here, for example, is

the beginning of a letter written by a government executive (Appendix C). Trainees can readily see that a reader other than Dr. Greene will have no idea what the letter is about; and even Dr. Greene, whose mind is no longer on his "inquiry at the October Council," will probably have some initial trouble.

In organizing the body of a document, writers in the work world need most clearly to be aware of how readers will read and use the document. As research shows, writers tend to organize a document in the order in which the facts occur to them -- the order in which they happened. As a result, we often find documents organized in narrative sequence, with the main message buried at or near the end. It's important to help trainees become aware of a range of logical organizing principles they can use and to help them see the virtue of choosing the organizing principle that best furthers the writer's purpose and the readers' use of the document. Again, I teach this concept by presenting materials from the Document Design project and applying them to on-the-job documents. Here is a list of "Useful Organizing Principles" from Writing in the Professions, to which I have added a commonly used principle, problem and solution (Appendix D).[5] And here is an outline of a document, again from Writing in the Professions, which uses one of the organizing principles on the list -- issues raised and discussed in order of importance (Appendix E).[6] An exercise I have used successfully is to give trainees a list of information I have pulled from an actual document, and to ask them to design an outline for the

document -- that is, to replicate the writer's process of organizing the document.

One such exercise is based on a trip report written by a scientist at a major corporation. Here's the situation. The scientist, Mr. Smith, was sent by his boss at ABC Company to one of the company's plants, to investigate and solve a problem. The plant manufactured wire which it sold to another company, XYZ, which in turn made window screens from the wire. Some of the screens XYZ made were rusting. Mr. Smith's job was to find out what caused some screens to rust, and to communicate this information to representatives of XYZ. Since XYZ was a large and important customer, Mr. Smith had to be careful not to upset them and thus lose their business.

Mr. Smith went to the plant, conducted tests on the screens, and concluded that: (1) XYZ used three different kinds of protective coating on the wire; and (2) one kind of coating was effective, but the other two were weak. Following the testing, he met at ABC Company's plant with representatives of XYZ Company. He presented the information about the coatings in such a way that the XYZ people were "receptive and appreciative," and promised to improve their finishing procedures.

In writing his report, Mr. Smith narrated everything that happened on his trip, in the order it happened. He eliminated no information, nor did he point out at the beginning of the report how successful he had been; this key message was buried in a mass of chronologically arranged information.

Here is a shortened version of the list of information pulled from this report (Appendix F). Notice that it moves chronologically -- from the purpose of the trip, to the tests and results, to the meeting with XYZ Company, to the results of the meeting. Notice also that it contains unimportant information that the writer should have selected out -- items six through eight, about the arrival of XYZ representatives, the tour of the plant, and lunch. The trainees in a writing course normally have little difficulty deciding what information to select in or out in this exercise. But many don't initially see how a problem-solution organization can strengthen the report: how it will allow the writer to feature the important information.

An effective outline for this report, then, might look like this:

Problem: Screens made by XYZ Company with wire we manufacture are rusting.

My tasks: (1) Find cause of rust.
(2) Communicate this information to XYZ Company.

Solution: (1) Rust is caused by poor protective coatings XYZ uses on wire.
(2) I met with representatives of XYZ and gave them this information.

Conclusion: They were receptive and appreciative. They invited us to review their finishing procedures and determine how they can improve them.

Trainees readily agree that if the report itself is written with a context-setting introduction and with these problem-

solution headings clearly visible, the writer's boss will give him immediate credit for a job well done.

Writers in business and industry get a great deal of credit for clear writing. Partly for this reason, the section on clear writing is always a popular part of the course. I begin by presenting "Guidelines for Writing Clearly," from Writing in the Professions and from another AIR text, Guidelines for Document Designers (Appendix G).[7] I try to obtain samples of trainees' writing before the course, in order to choose which guidelines to present based on the trainees' problems. In presenting each guideline, I describe the research on which it's based, explain the guideline, show models, and ask participants to revise some of their own sentences. Trainees enjoy untangling and simplifying sentences such as these two, which are full of nominalizations (Appendix H). They understand and appreciate the concept that excessive nominalization can cause gobbledegook like this. Trainees also enjoy revising marathon sentences like these (Appendix I). A low chuckle usually rumbles around the room as people try to identify who could have written such sentences.

While the audience will give the consultant no argument at all about the need for clarity, they aren't quite so likely to accept the need for a plain and simple style. To put it simply, they like the style they are used to; and they recognize that the commonly accepted style will get them the most credit. At best, perhaps, the consultant, while teaching principles of clear writing, can teach trainees what particular features of language contribute to a plain style and to a formal, flowery style. In

this way, the writer begins to know how to write in various styles and can choose the style appropriate for his or her situation. In other words, we can hope that if people continue to write largely in the passive voice and with fancy words, they will at least do so knowingly.

A focus on revising and editing completes the sense of process and of using strategies in the writing process. Checklists such as this one (Appendix J),[8] which emphasizes the whole document, can be found in Writing in the Professions. Note how it directs the writer to check the document against the purpose and the readers' use, and how it helps the writer check the organization. Writing in the Professions also contains a checklist for clear writing, to help writers edit the language of a document. Writers on the job can use these checklists both for self-review and for reviewing others' writing. In addition, trainees sometimes create their own checklists, based on the particular formats and objectives of their documents.

There's an old game consultant-trainers play, in which we ask course participants to fold their arms in front of them, then change and put the other arm on top. People feel slightly uncomfortable when they fold their arms differently from usual. The consultant points out that if you feel this amount of discomfort at simply changing your way of crossing your arms, no wonder it's so difficult to change long ingrained and partly unconscious habits such as those you use in writing. This game

helps to alert trainees to what we consultants in writing are really asking for: a change in basic concepts about what good writing is and how it can be achieved. The game also helps to alert consultants who teach writing in the work world to the difficulty of making change happen.

Those of us who accept this challenge are, I feel, very fortunate to have available the work of the Document Design project: to use as a guide in designing courses, as an authority in persuading trainees to want to change, and as a source for practical, workable methods and materials which we can adapt to our particular audiences. Without that help, we'd probably still be hitting randomly at the calls for grammar courses, formats and formulas, and impressive writing styles. We might just be out there swinging at stray balls.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Ron and Susan Zemke, "Thirty Things We Know For Sure About Adult Learning," in Adult Learning in Your Classroom, ed. Philip G. Jones (Minneapolis; Training Magazine, 1982), p. 116.

[2] Dixie Goswami, Janice C. Redish, Daniel B. Felker, and Alan Siegel, Writing in the Professions (Washington, DC; American Institutes for Research, 1981), pp. 4-5.

[3] Goswami, pp. 68-70.

[4] Goswami, p. 81.

[5] Goswami, p. 84.

[6] Goswami, p. 86.

[7] Goswami, pp. 107-108. Also, Daniel B. Felker, Frances Pickering, Veda R. Charrow, V. Melissa Holland, and Janice C. Redish, Guidelines for Document Designers (Washington, DC; American Institutes for Research, 1981).

[8] Goswami, p. 168.

Appendix A

PRE-WRITING CHECKLIST

1. Why are you writing the document?
2. Who is the primary reader?
3. Who are the secondary readers?
4. What do you want the readers to do as a result of reading the document?
5. How often will the readers use the document?
6. What is its message?
7. What is the technical background of the readers?
8. What is the readers' attitude toward the document?
9. What reaction do you expect from the readers?
10. What constraints are posed by the system in your organization, by how the document is used, or by how the document is distributed?

CONTEXT-SETTING INTRODUCTION

How to Index a Document

The purpose of this article is to show you how to index any document. You should follow the indexing process step-by-step:

- examining the document page-by-page and underlining words to be included in the index
- recording the words (or subjects) on note cards and alphabetizing them
- evaluating the finished index for specificity and technicality.

In addition, this article presents several rules about indexing names, being consistent, marking errors, and underlining italicized words.

Appendix C

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Dear Dr. Greene,

In the course of preparing some material for orienting new review committee members, I put together a few thoughts related to your inquiry at the October Council, to which Dr. White replied on November 25. These additional comments may provide some further clarification.

Appendix D

USEFUL ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

- A time sequence
- Steps in a logical process
- Issues (questions or characteristics or topics) raised and discussed in order of importance or relevance
- Elements or objects being compared on several factors
- A chain of cause and effect
- Sources of information
- Audiences or roles
- The format of the document the writer is responding to
- A traditional format that the audience will recognize
- A problem and its solution

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Appendix E

OUTLINE OF A DOCUMENT ORGANIZED BY ISSUE

Which Typesetting Machine Should XYZ Company Buy?

Context-setting Introduction

The question
The recommendation
A brief statement of the reasons for the recommendation

Background

Current capabilities of the system
- facts
- analysis
- conclusion

Needs for a different system
- facts
- analysis
- conclusion

Options that were investigated and issues that were considered

Issue 1: What each machine can do

Machine A
Machine B
Machine C

Issue 2: What each machine costs

Machine A
Machine B
Machine C

Issue 3: What options are available to expand each machine in the future

Machine A
Machine B
Machine C

Conclusion

Recommendation
Justification for recommendation
(Summary from each issue)

Appendix F

MAKING A PLAN FOR A TRIP REPORT

Information

1. Trip to ABC Plant to meet with Quality Assurance personnel.
2. Purpose: (1) Find out what causes metal wire we make to rust when XYZ Company uses it to make window screens. (2) Meet with representatives of XYZ Company to solve the problem.
3. Conducted tests on samples of screens.
4. Discovered that XYZ uses three different coatings on the wire, and one of these coatings is superior to others.
5. After considering the data and political considerations for this important customer, prepared program.
6. XYZ people arrived and were given a tour of plant.
7. Tour ended at noon, followed by lunch.
8. About 18 people attended meeting in conference room.
9. Discussed coatings.
10. As a result of proper presentation of data, the XYZ people concluded that their coating was not as protective as it should be.
11. XYZ people were very receptive and appreciative of our thoughts.
12. They invited us to their plant to review their finishing procedures and determine how they can improve them.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING CLEARLY

1. Write in the active voice.
2. Use action verbs rather than nouns made out of verbs.
3. Avoid jargon and unnecessarily difficult words.
4. Don't rename for the sake of variety.
5. Don't use extra words.
6. Write short sentences.
7. Put the parts of each sentence into logical order.
8. Untangle convoluted sentences.
9. Rewrite multiple negatives as positive sentences.
10. Avoid noun strings.

NOMINALIZATIONS

1. Consolidation of systems currently dispersed in inadequate facilities and collocation of personnel resources also dispersed in still other locations is essential to effect effective accomplishment of assigned and projected workloads.

2. Failure to have current "programs" can result in rejection of operational systems and components and replacement of good components which then result in unnecessary consumption of spare parts.

LONG SENTENCES

1. This satisfactory position is fortuitous in that the payments made during the quarter covered the overtime worked between 27 November and 22 February and the payments in lieu are only made every other month on even numbered months and so there has been only one payment during the first quarter.

2. The present situation of housing existing equipment in several dispersed areas throughout the depot leads to inefficiencies due to frequent equipment breakdown resulting from poor environment controls and loss of productive manhours due to engineers and computer specialists having to travel to these dispersed locations.

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Appendix J

CHECKLIST FOR A CLEAR DOCUMENT

1. Is it clear what the document is for?
2. Is it clear what the document is about?
3. Is it clear what the user is supposed to do with the document?
4. Does it have an informative title?
5. Does it have a useful table of contents?
6. Can the reader easily find the answer to specific questions?
7. Is the important information first?
8. Is the organization logical?

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